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ABSTRACT

Ten commonly-held positions concerning language learning and teaching and counter-positions for each are presented with the counter-positions supported with experiences from a first-year French classroom. The positions challenged are: (1) it is inappropriate to mix English and the target language in the same spoken sentence; (2) students cannot learn to speak a foreign language well enough to create their own sentences within two years; (3) students cannot understand the target language well enough for the teacher to conduct class in it; (4) students never have to repeat material they have been exposed to once; (5) students should not look at the written form of the target language for several weeks, to avoid English interference; (6) learning to write the language has little to do with learning to speak it, and should be put off until fairly late; (7) past foreign language teaching techniques are all bad which is why no one uses grammar-translation or audio-lingual methods; (8) memorization of dialogues is an unrealistic method; (9) foreign language students know English grammar; and (10) any native speaker can teach the target language. A flexible, pragmatic approach to language teaching, always keeping in mind what the objective is, is recommended. (MSE)

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# Purism versus Pragmatism in Foreign Language Teaching and Acquisition

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Descartes' famous "Discours de la méthode" begins with the well-known observation, "Common sense is the most equally distributed item in the world." This apparently optimistic statement is qualified if not contradicted a few pages later when the author admits he hesitated to study philosophy under the masters of his time, because none of the philosophers could agree among themselves on any of the important issues they studied.

Theories of foreign language education come and go, and new approaches to teaching pass like styles in clothing. Some are rather radical, and are hardly accepted by the foreign language education establishment. But even the establishment itself sometimes unwittingly produces rebels. There are a few teachers who, like Galileo, when threatened by the Inquisition, hastened to deny his heretical position, yet, so the story goes, muttered under his breath, "And yet it turns."

And so it is in our profession. Some members of our discipline question, at times disdainfully, certain techniques — even though the techniques work! Tracy D. Terrell explains in his article, "A Natural Approach to Second Language Acquisition and Learning," how foreign language acquisition can be increased considerably in the first year class by de-emphasizing grammar and allowing students to speak English in the F.L. classroom as much as they want to. This is not to say that the classroom is totally void of the target language or of grammar; in Terrell's model, the teacher speaks the target language and the student is free to respond in English if he or she so wishes. In his article, which appears in the November 1977 issue of the Modern Language Journal, Terrell claims his students do indeed learn the language. Immediately following his article appears another viewpoint by Mark Goldin, who favors emphasizing grammar and the development of the "humanistic" skills of logical analysis which were once one of the prime "raison d'etres" for studying foreign languages, particularly Latin. Here, then are widely divergent systems of foreign language education.

The purpose of my own presentation is not to attack "theoreticians" or "purists" but rather simply to state some alternatives to certain commonly accepted views and practices. To some, what I have to say will be extremely self-evident; to others very "far-out." I realize that one might cite proverbs to justify one's position such as "The proof of the pudding is in the eating," or a variant thereof, "The proof of the language-learning is in the speaking, understanding, writing and reading" or "What works for one won't work for another." I am sorry that that is the case, and I understand perfectly well that some of my ideas may appear to be so strange that all the logic in the world would be useless. And so I will both begin and end this presentation with a plea for a willing suspension of disbelief. At the

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end of my presentation, I will show a brief video-tape of the activities of my first-year French classroom which will hopefully serve as some sort of "proof" that some of the ideas I espouse are feasible and educationally sound.

The most direct method of stating some of these less-commonly held views is to draw up a list of positions (or at least of perceived positions) and counter-positions, which will permit a one- to- one comparison.

Position #1. It is totally inappropriate to mix English and the target language in the same spoken sentence.

Counter-position #1: An educated person feels no qualms whatsoever about inserting an occasional foreign expression into his speech, if it serves his purpose. For example: "Rousseau's Weltanschauung would not permit him to trust any well-educated person for very long. The raison d'etre of most of his writings is to justify his mania."

Several years ago there appeared in a popular magazine an article entitled "You sprechen fluent deutsch in eine hour." It was written in a totally silly tone; the author wrote "fractured" German -- sentences containing more English than German. The article was funny. But simply because it was funny does not mean it was not useful. It is my personal but very firm opinion that a student who is trying to learn a foreign language ought to be encouraged to use as many words and sounds of the target language as he possibly can, and then to use English to complete his expression if necessary; above all, he should not be ridiculed or intimidated if he begins to try to speak in the target language and finds it necessary to switch to his native language. The attitude of both many students and teachers, as far as I have been able to determine it, and this is based strictly upon my personal experience, is that the student who switches back and forth from the target language to English is a smart-aleck, a goof-off, a student who is not serious. It is in order to avoid being perceived as such a non-serious student, that many of them simply refuse to try to speak, but rather, timidly say, "Can I say this in English?" Many will say: "The grammar of French or Spanish or German is not like the grammar of English. There is too large of a gap between the student's native language and the target language to allow for such a mixture as you advocate." My answer to this is that I don't believe anyone can prove there is anything intrinsically or morally wrong with either the student or even the teacher speaking "Frenglish" or "Spanglish" or "Deutschlish" during the first few days or weeks of class and then replacing, litle by little, the English words with words from the target language; in particular, in order to create in the student a WILLINGNESS to try to use the language, there is no harm, I believe, in allowing him to use a meta-language, or as some have called it, an interlanguage, or "pidgin" language. In other words, I go one step further than does Terrell, because I encourage the student to use a mixture of English and the target language. The reason for this is

that many students feel that until they can pronounce a complete sentence or paragraph in the target language, they should remain in their native language. But, to repeat, the "pidgin" language I am encouraging consists of a mixture of English and the target language. The purist, who rejects this notion, lives outside of time, because he sees language as a perfect piece of art, rather than as a living, growing corpus that can perhaps never be spoken perfectly, not even by members of an elitist academy of the country where that language is spoken. The purist is afraid the student will learn errors that can never be eradicated, or that the student will never take the foreign language seriously. My own experience suggests otherwise. I agree with a growing number of foreign language teachers who favor a communicative-competence approach to foreign languages education, that our job as teachers is not simply to correct errors, but also to encourage communication, and to help students gain self-confidence so that they can progress; I have confidence that with time and encouragement, student will eliminate their own errors.

In fact, I have often wondered why it is that children who are exposed to baby-talk somehow acquire adult-talk, at least in the vast majority of cases. Is not baby-talk a sort of meta-language spoken by parents who attempt thereby to encourage their young children to talk? True, an adult language, a foreign language, is in many respects different from a child learning a first learning, and one of the greatest errors of a past methodology was to fail to take these differences into consideration. But that does not mean that there are NO similarities between the two processes. An important series of articles appeared in New Frontiers in Foreign Language Education, in which many of these same ideas are propounded. Three authors in particular, Corder, Nemser and Selinker show how pidginization, as defined above. has not been exploited to loosen the tongues of our students. This is not a new theory; these authors were publishing their ideas about pidginization in the late 1960's and early 1970's. One wonders why apparently so few in the profession are acquainted with their ideas. A possible explanation is that teachers who subscribe to the other methodologies will not take this approach really seriously; shades of Galileo. (And, of course, they will be condemned to rediscover this technique for themselves, as in my case; for I have only begun to read the literature about this theory within the past three months, after having re-invented it myself over five years ago.)

The only real stumbling block to using "Frenglish" or "Spanglish" or "Deutschlish," it seems to me, is the unwillingness on the part of teachers to learn to think in this meta-language, which admittedly, requires effort. But after the teacher has acquired the meta-language and has begun to use it extensively in class, most students find it immeasurably easier to learn to use the authentic target language than is the case under more traditional approaches.

In order for students to begin to use the authentic target language, they must want to use it and feel comfortable about using it. One of

the greatest difficulties language teachers face is helping students overcome that tremendous attitudinal barrier (which is entirely different from any intellectual barrier they might feel) about actually using the foreign language for real communication. It requires effort to speak in the foreign language, especially when one is just learning. It also requires a sufficiently positive self-concept to be able to endure the somewhat humiliating experience of having to speak very haltingly, in child-like forms, and in a way that requires that one's interlocutor be patient. Some individuals learning a foreign language simply may not have the mental health that is really required, even though they MAY have the necessary native intelligence, to learn a foreign language. This means that the foreign language teacher is much more than the ordinary conveyor of knowledge. He must be extraordinarily supportive and patient but, at the same time, demand that the student make the effort to communicate in the foreign language. For if he fails to demand this of the student, the student, taking the path of least resistance, usually switches back to the familiar ground of his native language. In fact, the biggest problem in the field of foreign language teaching is, always has been, and always will be, finding teachers who are truly committed to helping students learn to speak the language, rather than simply lecturing about grammar. There is no question that lecturing about grammar is infinitely easier for a teacher than the psychologically taxing effort required to both encourage and demand that students use the target language. It is for that reason that so many F.L. teachers fall into the trap of thinking they are teaching a foreign language when all they are doing is lecturing about grammar. No six-year-old child who speaks Spanish natively knows very much about grammar, but he certainly does know how to handle the greater part of his language, and we need to keep this important concept in mind every time we are tempted to pontificate in class.

Position #2. Students cannot learn to speak a foreign language well enough to create their own sentences with less than two years of study. It is therefore useless to try to encourage them to speak anything except choral pattern drills and memorized dialogs.

Counter-position #2. Rainer Sell shows that students can learn to speak a foreign language in one semester. Once they learn how English is related to other Western European languages, and begin to actively use cognates, and once they learn the pronunciation system of the target language, students can speak in the foreign language in a rather short period of time — about one semester. "Ah yes, but how WELL do they speak," some will say. Answer: Admittedly, not like native speakers, and admittedly, not all will speak as well as others. Some will hardly be able to say more than 3 or 4 sentences; but others will be able to do much more. In fact, as soon as students learn the three points just mentioned, many of them can speak much more than they ever thought would be possible after only one semester. Many of the members of our profession seem to take gleeful pleasure in pointing out all the differences between the student's native language and the target

language, and the myriad exceptions and intricacies of the target language. But by emphasizing the similarities between languages and encouraging students to make intelligent guesses and generalizations, we actualize that proverb which says, "Catch a man a fish and he will eat today; teach him how to fish and he will never be hungry."

Position #3: Students cannot understand the spoken foreign language well enough to allow the teacher to conduct the class in the target language. Therefore the teacher should handle all "important" class business strictly in English, to insure that all students understand everything.

Counter-position #3: If the teacher uses many cognates, if he teaches the students the principles of how to understand these cognates, if he is very careful to use them often, and to avoid using English whenever possible, he can indeed conduct the class in the target language beginning very early. Of course this requires that the teacher be constantly thinking about his vocabulary, to determine if the words he uses are cognates, or are easily recognizable by the students. To simply prattle away, without any thought for the vocabulary the students might or might not be able to understand, is useless. But by consciously using a very precise, cognate-laden vocabulary (even if this includes false cognates), the teacher can work wonders in this area of using the foreign language at a very early stage. A corollary to this idea is that we must slow down in our speech. For years and years, it has been held by many that the student must hear the target language spoken at its normal rate. Why? What is the reasoning behind this "article of faith"? Let us rather slow down and allow the student to understand, and thereby communicate by our attitude that we teachers are truly interested in the student's learning, rather than simply massaging our own egos as we strut in our superior knowledge. In addition, the first items of vocabulary the students learn ought to be directly related to their classroom experience: how to respond to roll-call, how to ask for classroom items (books, pencils, paper, etc.), how to respond to questions and/or ask questions in class. This is what makes using the target language meaningful, and helps us avoid that artificiality so associated with textbooks that pretend students will be leaving to go to the foreign country tomorrow!

Position #4: Students never have to repeat material to which they have been exposed once.

Counter-position #4: None of us really believe that, but many of us act as if we do. We try to teach too much, and thereby end up not teaching anything. We fail to review often enough. We, the professors, seem to assume that because we understand given notions or expressions, that our students understand them and can use them. Instead, we should ask the students themselves, often, if they actually do feel confident about the notion in question. This is an excellent way to encourage discussion in the classroom. Every so often, the teacher should ask: "Comprenez-vous?" "Entienden?" or "Verstehen

Sie?" and encourage students to respond openly and honestly: "Oui;" "Non," "Comme ci, comme ça," "un peu," etc.

Position #5: Students should not look at the written form of the F.L. for several weeks. because if the do, they will fall victim to interference from English. Rather, their first exposure to the target language should be strictly audial. They should listen carefully to the teacher and mimic his pronunciation exactly.

Counter-position #5: The position just stated constitutes the heart and soul of the audio-lingual method, the "hear it and say it" approach. The Suzuki music method is very similar, and is indeed very effective, as the A.L. method is, for children. But as people pass through puberty and into young adulthood, their willingness to accept this strictly audial approach to learning decreases. Students crave to SEE the language as well as hear it. They have already learned to READ one language and we should turn this skill they possess to our advantage, rather than ignore it completely. To refuse this is to treat the students like small children, and they sense and resent this. It is not difficult to teach high school and college students how to apply the study of phonetics, or sound-symbol correlation, as it is sometimes called in the literature, to the target language. This allows students to "sound out," after a short period of study, a high percentage of all the words in the foreign language dictionary. This is infinitely more satisfying to the majority of students than the mimic-memorize method of a few years ago, but which has never really been replaced in many schools. The older approach, which might be compared to the "look and say" method of learning how to read (so forcefully attacked in the book "Why Johnny Can't Read"), produced students who were able to pronounce a very few expressions with native-like skill, but who, upon seeing the written form of the target language, lapsed immediately into very poorly pronounced expressions, simply because they had never learned the relationship of the written symbol to the sounds these symbols represent in the target language. Estarellas and Regen have show conclusively that training in sound-symbol correlation is extremely significant in aiding the student to achieve communicative compentence....

Position #6: Learning to write the foreign language has little to do with learning to speak it, and should be put off until fairly late.

Counter-position #6: Most educators, no matter what their discipline, agree that the learning process is enhanced as one brings as many of the senses as possible into play. I have just argued in favor of bringing the eye into the foreign language learning activity at very early stages and now I want to argue in favor of adding to that, the hand. A student who writes in the target language during the first day or week of class, even if it is only to copy a sentence or two he may not completely understand, comes into very close psychological contact with the target language: he creates language. By writing every day, two or three sentences of his own creation, on any theme of his choice,

no matter how inept he may feel, he subvocalizes expressions in the language, and this leads to greater confidence in his ability to actually vocalize it. In fact, if the student actually writes and pronounces simultaneously, that is even better. Writing also aids in the process of vizualization, which helps not only in pronunciation but also in the formation of sentences. A wise teacher encourages the student to use writing to express personally meaningful messages at a very early stage, to submit them to the teacher for correction and then to memorize and use them in everyday speech. Such a teacher is then able to help the student compare last week's written and oral work to that of this week, which helps the student become aware that he is in fact making progress in his ability to use the language. I ask my students to write, among other things, their frustrations and concerns if they so desire. Besides improving their French, it is very theurapeutic, in that it helps them get these frustrations out of their systems.

Position #7: The techniques and methods of past F.L. teaching systems are all bad. This is the reason that no teachers still use the grammar-translation or audio-lingual methods.

Counter-position #7: Whereas some of us may refuse to consider new methodologies, others act as if foreign language education has no history, or at least, any worthwhile history. But the majority of us probably still use some aspects of these two systems, even if we are very committed to innovation. For most of us, as mentioned earlier, have a tendency to equate the teaching of language with the teaching of grammar; most of us still use the mim-mem technique to teach pronunciation. Both of these "methods" ought to be re-appraised. This is not to suggest that we ought to totally abandon them simply because they SEEM out of date. Indeed, when some of us do begin to change our methodology, we make the mistake of throwing out the baby with the bath water. For example it is very popular nowadays to take the following position:

Proponents of the audio-lingual method were simply unrealistic in their claims that students learn a language by memorizing dialogues.

Counter-position #8: By memorizing, one gains fluency and fluidity. In recent years, memorization has come to be associated with counter-productivity, decreasing enrollments, and anti-intellectualism. I submit that in the ultimate analysis, everything we ever learn is, after a fashion, memorized.

Position #9: Students of foreign language know English grammar. This is why a university foreign language class needs to be held only three days a week: we are building on what the students already know.

Counter-position #9: The great majority of beginning foreign language students have only a rudimentary knowledge of English grammar, no matter how much they may have studied English. English grammar is

simply not taught very much any more, and it is unwise to presume that students understand the terms "personal pronoun," "relative pronoun," or "demonstrative pronoun," much less "past participle," "adverbial clause" or even "definite article." The English teachers no longer teach grammar. This is not intended to be a deprecation of English teachers. It is simply an observation that teachers of English have found that teaching grammar does not improve the area with which most of them are concerned: students' ability to write. And so, it has fallen to us, the foreign language profession, to teach English grammar at the same time we teach the grammar of the foreign language. This does not mean that we must do it all in the first year. But eventually, we should plan on teaching our students English grammar.

I mentioned grammar in negative terms a little earlier, as if to suggest that the study of grammar is not good. I will cheerfully admit that I myself do teach grammar. But in order to keep grammar from becoming the overriding concern of the class, I frequently ask the students which is the most important: pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar. Many students bring to the classroom the mistaken impression that the study of grammar is the most important aspect of their foreign language learning experience; I try to change that by actively encouraging the students to verbalize the idea that pronunciation is more important than grammar, and that grammar is merely a means to an end, improved communication, rather than an end in and of itself. This means that the grammar presentation must NOT be a lecture, but rather a discussion, with students making comments and offering examples. The principal activity of the classroom is speaking, and the material spoken about MAY (or may not) include grammar. Peer-teaching can play an important role in this activity, because students can discuss formal concepts and test each other on them before and after the teacher-led discussion takes place. Since young adults crave order or predictability in the target language, it is indeed appropriate to teach grammar -- and I admit that. But we must keep grammar subservient to the most important activity of the class: improving the capacity to communicate in the target language; we must keep grammar our servant, and not let it become our master.

But the question now arises, "Should the teacher explain grammar, be it that of English or of the target language, in English? Or can he use the target language to make the explanation? If he DOES use the target language, is he not defeating his purpose, since the students will not understand him? Again, I suggest that by speaking Frenglish (or Spanglish), we can communicate quite a variety of concepts to the students. But let us avoid complicated explanations. The grammar is only an EXCUSE to use the language for meaningful communication. The EXCHANGE of ideas is more important than the ideas themselves.

Position #10: Any native speaker can teach the target language.

Counter-position #10: Any native speaker who knows the difficulties the students will encounter as they attempt to learn the target language, and who makes a concerted effort to bridge the gap between the two languages, and this includes not only the grammatical gaps but also the attitudinal gaps, MAY be able to teach the target language EFFECTIVELY. Formal training in contrastive linguistics of the two languages may help, but there still remain large areas that could be better elucidated: the complicated usage of the articles, just for a beginning. And even after having studied such grammatical material, one must realize that after all is said and done, the teacher does not really TEACH a language, but only tries to encourage the student and facilitate his task in LEARNING the language. To some of us this may come as a blow; we are no longer teachers, but mere "facilitators." But if we are really interested in foreign language education, this is one of the hard realities, in my opinion, with which we must come to grips.

In this presentation, I have obviously not tried to be particularly scholarly. Like Descartes, whom I cited at the beginning, I have begun to understand that people think alike but they don't think alike for very long. My intent has not been to criticize, but to indicate what I have learned from personal experience. I wish I could present scientific evidence to prove the validity of these counter-positions. For the time being, until I am able to prove them, I offer them and hope you may be stimulated by them. It is not my intention that the foregoing list be considered definitive, but it does represent some of the greater disparities between what many of the members of the profession are presently doing (or have been doing) for a long time. There is no question that with the official demise of the audial-lingual approach, the profession has acquired a variety of approaches which we usually call "eclecticism." But the principal issue which still remains to be solved is that of "WHAT" are we supposed to be teaching in the F.L. classroom. Is it actually possible to provide the student with sufficient "information" and more importantly, sufficient confidence, to enable him to actually communicate in the F.L.? If so, then every class period should provide us with food for thought, as we try to devise ways to help the students actually acquire this skill. In other words, our method should be characterized not as "eclectic, but rather "pragmatic." We must learn to be extremely flexible, but at the same time, understand very clearly what our long-time goal really is, and not compromise it.

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